`Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?': Seduction, Space, and a Fictional Mode

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[In the following excerpt, Gillis examines themes of lost innocence and transgression in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"]

Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is a story about beginnings and passage points; and it is a story about endings: the end of childhood, the end of innocence. The account of fifteen-year-old Connie's encounter with a mysterious stranger named Arnold Friend, a man who leads his victim not to a promising new world, but, rather, to a violent sexual assault, is a tale of initiation depicted in grotesque relief.

But "Where Are You Going" is also a story where spatial limitations are of crucial concern, and to this degree it provides a commentary on stories and story-telling. As Oates transforms elements of fairy tale and dream into a chilling description of temptation, seduction, and probable rape, we are forced to consider the distinctions between fairy tale and seduction narrative, to note particularly that in "Where Are You Going" seduction involves the invasion of personal, interior space: " ... his words, replete with guile,/Into her heart too easy entrance won," Milton says of Satan's meeting with Eve. Women are vulnerable to seduction, and of course rape, Susan Brownmiller has reminded us, for what at first may be seen as purely physiological reasons; and there is little doubt of physical violence when Arnold Friend croons to Connie, "I'll come inside you where it's all secret"; but the seduction motif functions so successfully in "Where Are You Going" because the delineation of interior space figured in the female body analogizes invasion at several levels: the domestic space, the state of childhood associated with the home, and, of course, the individual consciousness....

At the outset we may identify "Where Are You Going" as an American "coming of age" tale, the main character Connie joining that cast of characters which includes Huckleberry Finn, Isabel Archer, and Jay Gatsby. But while the poles of Oates' story are innocence and experience, the focus of attention is the process of seduction, or the threshold between the two states. The lines are clear, the threshold visually realized. Connie belongs to a tradition of domesticated Eves; for them, Satan's entrance into the garden is replaced by the invasion of a rake like Lovelace (in Richardson's *Clarissa*) into one's private chamber—or ultimately, in the twentieth century, by the approach of the cowboy-booted Arnold Friend to the kitchen door of an asbestos-covered ranch house. The physical world shrinks in this fiction; unlike Eden, the perimeter of a private room, or body, lends itself to specific accounting. Within a described locus, space itself is at issue, the fiction setting up a tension whereby the private is open to both attack and transformation.

Spatial limits are increasingly important in "Where Are You Going." If the threshold of the kitchen door ultimately receives the burden of tension in the tale, Oates carefully prepares us for the climactic scene by setting up, at the outset, contrasting *loci*. The very title of the story calls attention to duality: a future (where you are going) and a past (where you have been). The tale catches its main character at a passage point where, it is implied, the future may depend precipitously on the past. More specifically,

the two major locations of the tale are the home and family unit it signifies, and the outside world represented first in the drive-in hamburger joint, later in Arnold Friend himself. Connie herself lives in two worlds, even dressing appropriately for each: she "wore a pull over jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home. Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home." Home is the daylight world, a known, established order where so-called parental wisdom would seem to negate the dreams and desires of youth. Connie is, then, constantly at odds with her family, ever looking forward to her excursions to the drive-in, the nighttime world, the "bright-lit, fly-infested restaurant" which she and her friend approach, "their faces pleased and expectant as if they were entering a sacred building that loomed up out of the night to give them what haven and blessing they yearned for." A mood of expectation pervades Connie's night-time world. Like the light on Daisy Buchanan's pier that promised romance to Jay Gatsby, the bright-lit hamburger joint also holds out new worlds within its "sacred" precincts: cars, music, boys, experience.

Even when the initial meeting with a boy named Eddie—the experience "down the alley a mile or so away"—is over, when the clock has struck eleven and the Cinderella land fades back into the night, a "big empty parking lot [with] signs that were faded and ghostly," even then, the mood of expectation is only temporarily broken. There will be other nights in this midsummer dream-time. Eddie and his like, all the boys, Oates tells us, "fell back and dissolved into a single face that was not even a face but an idea, a feeling, mixed up with the urgent insistent pounding of the music and humid air of July." No wonder that Connie resists being "dragged back to the daylight" by her mother's too- insistent voice. The mother who had once been pretty ("but now her looks were gone and that was why she was always after Connie") sees in Connie a dim outline of her own former self; but the dream perception seems long faded, and Connie's sister June, the only other female family member, is a plain, stalwart sort who has clearly never had much to do with dreams.

But mother and sister are not the villains here, of course, Connie no Cinderella for whom a night-time dream becomes daylight reality. Rather, dream becomes nightmare when Connie first meets at the drive-in Arnold Friend, no Prince Charming, but a man with metallic, cold eyes, driving a bright gold jalopy. And Arnold Friend only pretends to be young. Later, with the discovery of Arnold's true age, Connie will feel her heart pound faster; the bizarre realization that Friend's companion has the face of a "forty year old baby" will cause the teenager to experience a "wave of dizziness." And we are shocked too: there is no fairy tale world here, no romance after all. Friend's first muttered threat, "Gonna get you, baby," is to be played out not in a dream, but in the daylight hours and within a domestic space.

Even before Arnold Friend's entrance into the driveway of Connie's home, reality and dream are beginning to clash dangerously. Connie sits in the sun "dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love, the caresses of love;" but when she opens her eyes she sees only a "back yard that ran off into weeds" and a house that looked small. Arnold's appearance in Connie's driveway on the Sunday morning when her family have gone off to a barbecue only underlines the confused merging of two worlds Connie has always kept apart. She approaches the kitchen door slowly, hangs out the screen door, "her bare toes curling down off the step." Connie is not yet ready to make the step outside.

With Arnold's arrival the significance of separate locations in "Where Are You Going" acquires new intensity, and the delineation of space becomes a matter of crucial concern. Connie's refusal to move

down off the step bespeaks her clinging to a notion that walls and exact locations offer the protection of the familial order. Now, with Friend's initial invitation to join him and his friend in the car, and with his assertion that he has placed his "sign" upon her, Connie moves further back into the kitchen: she "let the screen door close and stood perfectly still inside it." From the familiar kitchen space, she attempts to make sense of her experience. But the mirror sunglasses make it impossible for the girl to see what Friend is looking at; the enigmatic smile tells nothing; and even as she attempts to amass assorted physical data on her visitor, she finds that "all these things did not come together."

Then the familiar and the private begin to give way to the unexpected visitor. Having realized the true age of the two intruders and being told that they will not leave until she agrees to go along with them, Connie has the sense that Friend "had driven up the driveway all right but had come from nowhere before and belonged nowhere ... everything that was so familiar to her was only half real." The drawing of the magical sign, a sign of ownership over her, suggests control over her own private consciousness. Connie wonders how Friend knows her name; but later, much more troubling, is his knowledge that her father is not coming back soon, that the family is at the picnic. Connie finds herself sharing a perhaps imaginary, perhaps real, view of the barbecue. Friend refers to a "fat woman" at the barbecue:

"What fat woman?" Connie cried.

"How do I know what fat woman. I don't know

every goddamn fat woman in the world!" Arnold

Friend laughed.

"Oh, that's Mrs. Hornsby.... Who invited her?"

Connie said. She felt a little lightheaded. Her

breath was coming quickly.

And penetration of consciousness is only the preamble to penetration in a sexual sense: "And I'll come inside you where it's all secret and you'll give in to me and you'll love me—" says Friend. The disorder implied in Friend's knowing too much, more than can be rationally explained, is now to be played out in trespassing upon the body itself. A limit has been passed. Connie does not want to hear these words; she "backed away from the door. She put her hand up against her ears as if she'd heard something terrible."

Connie retreats further within the kitchen, but the space of the room also loses familiarity as interior worlds break down. Just as earlier in the morning the adolescent has begun to see her own home as small, now the kitchen looked "like a place she had never seen before, some room she had run inside but that wasn't good enough, wasn't going to help her." Doors too become meaningless. "But why lock [the door]?" Friend taunts; "it's just a screen door, It's just nothing." Friend is still articulating spatial limits—"[I] promise not to come in unless you touch the phone"—but such limits no longer have

meaning. The statement, "I want you," the words of the teenager's love song, now connote a world where the limits around self are not viable. The breaking of a limitation and the opening of a door ... destroy both individual innocence and the order of the innocent's world. "It's all over for you here," Friend tells Connie. Crying out for the mother that will not come, Connie feels not the protective parental embrace, but rather a feeling in her lungs as if Friend "was stabbing her ... with no tenderness." And then the horrible statement muttered in a stage voice, the statement which spells the end of a world: "The place where you came from ain't there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. This place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time."

Obliteration through violent assault is multi-dimensional in "Where Are You Going." The domestic space, a house as the nurturing place of childhood, yields to attack from outside no less than the body, consciousness, even "heart" of the girl is forced to give way. Observing that the house looks solid, Friend tells Connie, "Now, put your hand on your heart, honey.... That feels solid too but we know better." And when Connie feels her own pounding heart, "she thought for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers, that belonged to her." If "Where Are You Going" is the story of the end of childhood, the end of romance, the invasion and probable destruction of private and self-contained space provide one important definition of the end of innocence. Friend's taking over the "heart" of the young girl so that "it was nothing that was hers" spells a conquest of both space and will: his intimation that he will wait for and then kill the family if Connie does not go with him is the more terrible because of Connie's own ambivalent feelings about her family, the breaking in the child's trust in her parents. Finally, the satanic visitor's incantation, "We'll go out to a nice field, out in the country where it smells so nice and it's sunny," represents not only a chilling perversion of pastoral—for the words of Satan can lead not toward, but only away from, Eden—but a ritualized statement that all of the walls defining an individual self have been destroyed. Connie's pushing open the screen door to go off with Arnold Friend, the ultimate yielding, signifies that indeed the place she came from "ain't there any more."

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